



How can you use digital engagement to increase student retention and improve student success?



Introduction

According to research*, typically around 6 in 100 students drop out of university every year and with increasing recent pressures, expectation is that number is set to rise.

Students who fail to graduate are costly to universities, colleges, and training providers and with many institutions facing an uncertain future, focusing on engagement and retention has become a number one priority.

“If you lose a first year you don’t just lose their £9,250 fees for the year – you lose nearly £28,000 over the three years of their degree”

- Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute thinktank

It is up to each individual institution to provide the information and engagement necessary to garner and keep a student’s interest and in this digital age, understanding the tools available and how they can assist is critical to survival.

This guide looks at how education establishments can use digital engagement to provide a better experience in order to attract and retain students.

1 Why is digital engagement important?

Addressing Retention Rates

Whilst dropout rates vary by as much as 17% between universities, student engagement and dropout rates are issues faced by all institutions. As teaching has increasingly moved online – and at a rapidly increased speed over the last 12 months – universities have unsuccessfully been able to match the pace to deliver the student experience they wanted to or which learners had signed up for. This coupled with general pressure from competing with other institutions means universities need to find new and engaging ways of interacting with students.

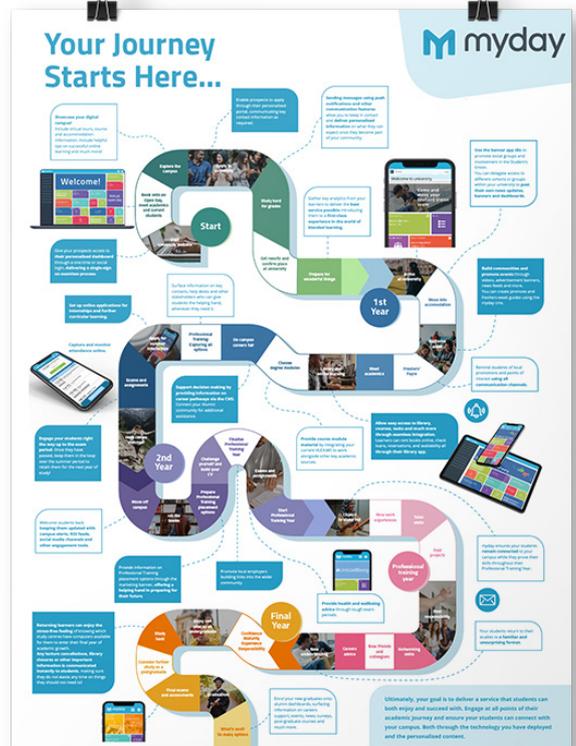
The digital expectation

With nearly 99% of 16–24-year old's owning a smartphone* and an average interaction with 9 different apps each day and around 30 per month, learners have come to use and expect apps to manage their day-to-day lives.

From ordering transport to travel into university, to listening to music streaming services on the journey in, students are constantly interacting with apps on the move. Once on campus they might arrange to meet with friends via chat platforms and order lunch or a coffee through an app.

“Students have become customers who bring their own digital world expectations to university. These customers are more savvy, better connected and more vocal than ever.”

- Equantiis



Learners expect to be able to interact with their institution via an app and do so as seamlessly as the apps they use to manage their day-to-day lives. Students are faced with a multitude of different systems in their studies – from their email, timetable, library, VLE to their online assessment system and student record information. To have an app which signposts them to the systems they need to make a success of their learning is required and proven to greatly increase engagement.

Additional Benefits

There are multiple other reasons to focusing on digital engagement and digital deliveries:

- **Enhancing Digital learning** - Teaching digitally can enhance learning experiences, save teaching time, enable better tailoring of learning to student needs, aid in tracking student progress and provide transparency into the learning process for all stakeholders.
- **Inclusion of remote students** - Remote students can feel part of your campus and community whilst being anywhere in the world at any time.
- **Availability and use of Data** – Digital tools allow the tracking and measuring of student activities. This will allow the identification of early warning indicators in a student's performance or behaviour enabling proactive steps towards assisting any individual or group.

*Statista, smartphone ownership penetration in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2012-2020 [statista.com/statistics/271851/smartphone-owners-in-the-united-kingdom-uk-by-age/](https://www-statista-com.translate.googl/statistics/271851/smartphone-owners-in-the-united-kingdom-uk-by-age/)

2 Start with a student-centric approach

Putting students first means meeting students where they are and making all aspects of academic life relevant and engaging. It means personalising the learning for each individual student to ensure the best possible outcome.

There is no 'one size fits all' for putting students first but considering them at the heart of university practices ensures that expectations and requirements stand a better chance of being met. This also applies to any digital solutions that are created.

Having several different platforms to register to and log in to can be overwhelming yet delivering a 'one-stop-shop' for such services with clear signposting and a mechanism for providing feedback ensures both positive engagement and a higher likelihood of success for those students.

Universities need to ensure that their technological solution puts the student at the forefront of design and implementation. Many systems that are designed and created to suit departmental needs and internal structures rather than the students' needs can be counterproductive and end up confusing and frustrating the student rather than be the assistance it's intended to be.

Technology now helps to deliver a student-centric approach by:

1. **Breaking the tyranny of time and space.**
Technology enables institutions to employ much better delivery modes for not just one-way instruction but two-way communication. Collaborative work breaks the tyranny of time and space in really important ways.
2. **Creating structure.** Through analytics tools there is now the ability to use student-generated data to create structured pathways for students. Deans and advisers can use these tools to help students to get from where they are to where they need to go even if that path is not a straight line.
3. **Enabling the evaluation and assessment of student learning at a much more granular level.**
There are now ways now to use tools to measure real learning, rather than the proxies for learning which HE leaders can take advantage of.

Any app implemented for student's academic lives needs to serve them throughout their whole lifecycle. This should include enabling prospective students to gain familiarity with the cultures and values of an institution before they join through to ensuring Alumni continue to feel a connection to where they graduated and want to help recruiting future students.



3 Personalise the student experience

Personalising the student experience is critical to supporting a student on their journey and via increased engagement, ultimately to their course completion and success.

Some good practice examples for delivering a digital personalised student experience include:

- Engaging students as partners in plans and decision-making to ensure actions are student centric
- Delivering coherent, personalised student learning experiences
- Creating an inclusive community and a common identity
- Providing individual, authentic, and feedback-rich assessments
- Providing learning and social spaces that are accessible, flexible and IT enriched
- Providing students with responsive, personalised support

Delivering services such as the above through an online portal or app simplifies the access and steps for a student and the benefit of such a digital environment will allow an institution to understand their student's needs and react accordingly due to the data it provides.

Transforming the delivery of higher education by using data and analytics not only improves the day-to-day experience for students but powerfully improves the outcomes for both the student and the institution along the entire journey.

Setting a range of goals and key performance indicators around the student experience helps keep all departments and personnel focused and aligned to objectives.



4

Utilise Data

Institutions who are achieving high levels of student success are utilising their data to transform the way they communicate and engage with their students. The use of digital tools introduces a wealth of data that allows an institution to proactively act upon and improve the outcomes of each individual student.

Gathering insights along the student's entire educational journey – from application to graduation, and beyond means the quality of service can be drastically improved leading to better student outcomes.

To address drop-out rates, universities need to ensure that their students are satisfied and engaged. By analysing data; such as engagement and interaction with an app, attendance, and use of resources, student welfare teams can analyse trends and identify students who are at a higher risk of dropping out.

Analysis of the data allows patterns to be identified in triggering student behaviour and the identification of software or systems that aren't optimally delivering in order to provide a better academic experience, increase student engagement and reduce drop-out rates.

Utilising digital solutions to deliver personalised content and on-demand digital services across the student lifecycle enables the ability for student data to be collected and be leveraged to improve the experience for any individual.



“Data Analytics Can Save Higher Education” say top college bodies*

Data analytics could be a budget booster for universities, as proven by Georgia State University for example*

* edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2019/11/data-analytics-can-save-higher-education-say-top-college-bodies

* success.gsu.edu/approach

Summary

It's important to recognise how much of an impact student engagement has on retention rates and how increasingly digital engagement is starting to take priority when engaging students. With the overwhelming majority of the student population now owning a smart phone, and in many cases multiple mobile devices, it has become the expectation that this is the primary method for communication and education delivery with institutions needing to meet demand.

Increasingly, students are expecting a personalised experience – one that's tailored to their particular needs, wants, interests, and their preferred method of communication. Institutions are now relying on technology and digital tools to reach prospect students rather than introducing it to new recruits as an impressive addition to their offering.

Digital tools aren't just an improvement for the student as a user however, but are also of great benefit to the institution too. Student portals and apps deepen students' connections to other people on campus, including their peers, professors and advisers.

The myday digital campus software addresses all of the considerations listed within this guide and much more.

myday is the leading engagement platform within education, enabling your institution to provide a digital environment for your community of prospects, students, staff and beyond.

Improving communication and retention through a personalised experience, myday exists to eliminate digital overwhelm and provide everything a user needs to realise success.

Implementing the right tool and doing this well means that in addition to students having simplified access to all of their academic requirements, admin staff and advisers have the information they need also to support students based on their individual needs.

Being student centric is at the heart of a successful implementation and putting students first means understanding the tapestry of experiences that they bring and helping the institution bend to those.

Providing a great experience is key to supporting students through their education. Individuals start their academic journey highly motivated to succeed but can quickly become overwhelmed by a flood of information, lack of direct communication, ineffective student support and feelings of social isolation.

Implementing a student portal and app helps each student on an individual level at every stage of their academic journey.

Using digital tools helps to increase student engagement, increasing student engagement helps increase student retention rates and increasing retention rates increases the number of successful students.

myday, an integrated web portal and mobile app platform, connects your systems and provides a flexible way to stay informed, empowering organisations to cultivate a sense of belonging in a digital world.

Learn more about myday at myday.collabco.com

If you would like to talk to one of our advisers today about any of the information included in this guide or how myday can improve your app offering then

please call **0800 048 9515**
or email info@collabco.co.uk